



# 2016 ANNUAL REPORT

Office of the Student Advocate | DC State Board of Education





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“ I truly felt like someone cared about my concerns and was willing to stand behind me, as a parent for what was right, not just for my child but what should be right for all of our children... The Office of the Student Advocate showed me that there are people who are truly willing to go to the front door with you and your concerns.

“ Anytime I speak to fellow parents whom are having difficulty [or have questions], I advise them to contact the Office of the Student Advocate.

“ [Faith's] compassion and attentiveness were important key components that made me feel that my situation was a top priority. She opened up an avenue platform that allowed me to share my story with so many.

“ Working with the Office of the Student Advocate... has been a refreshing and positive experience. The [Office] not only works collaboratively, but inclusively... The [Office] works diligently with detail, yet with vision to encompass foresight and the larger picture of the goals they are trying to achieve collectively. I appreciate the honesty and thoughtfulness [that] Faith and her team put forth as they work with many seemingly disparate parts, connecting it to a whole with the purpose to serve the students, parents, and families with integrity, effectiveness, and positivity.

“ This role should be given more authority to be more effective.

Annual Report released October 26, 2016.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Over the course of our inaugural school year, our office has connected with many government agencies, community organizations, parents, students, and families. We have nurtured these partnerships through panels, meetings, working sessions, and collaborative projects. This inaugural year of connecting, supporting, and relationship building has uncovered myriad systemic issues around informational access, community disenfranchisement, and compartmentalizing of important work. Therefore, we decided to focus intently on the following issues:

- ▶ Accessibility to information and more than 400 educational resources via our online Education & Community Resource Guide.
- ▶ Developed and currently operate a “311 system” for public education — our Request for Assistance hotline and online form — to address any education-related questions public school families, or prospective families, might have and provides connection to resources and referrals.
- ▶ Developed and facilitated three “Know Your Rights” special education panel discussions, which provided resources and training focused on the special education and Section 504 processes — the series was designed to support families in Wards 4, 5, and 8 in understanding their rights and their role in the process.
- ▶ Developed and implemented a parent empowerment and advocacy training series and resource tools in Ward 7.
- ▶ Established a working group and conducted four meetings comprised of government and community-based members focused on the issue of safe passage for our students — the development of a resource toolkit to support families in that process while also engaging local education agencies (LEAs) in the process.
- ▶ Collaborated with Council for Court Excellence to analyze 63 LEA student discipline policies to develop resource tools for families for reactive and proactive advocacy as well as factors to consider in school selection.
- ▶ Developed a streamlined online tool for public school enrollment questions and information.
- ▶ Developed effective communication tools and training to support and foster relationships between students, parents, and schools.
- ▶ Developed a public education governance map to clarify the roles of our various stakeholders, agencies, and organizations that govern our public education system.

We are honored to have the opportunity to serve our families and assist them in becoming informed, connected, and empowered to take control of their children’s education, and we look forward to a successful next year! ■

*\*\* For more regarding our upcoming initiatives for the 2016-17 school year, please see our Moving Forward section on page 29 of this report\*\**

## Letter from the Student Advocate



October 2016

To: District of Columbia State Board of Education

We are humbled and excited to have completed our inaugural school year in the newly established Office of the Student Advocate.

As a city, we have made huge strides to improve the quality of public education for our students. With growth and improvement, we have also created an education landscape that is complex. While our city is dedicated to the advancement of public education, it has nurtured an education system that is daunting to understand and navigate. This system is supported by an abundance of agencies, offices, and organizations that are working on behalf of our students and families, but knowing what resources are out there can be challenging.

We know that the very uniqueness of our public education system can serve as both an opportunity and a barrier. As focused advocates, we are able to offer centralized services and development opportunities that meet the resource and information needs of families in support of their students’ educational attainment.

From May 2015 until today, we have:

- » Launched, and currently operate, a public education hotline which accepts questions and inquiries (Requests for Assistance) from students, parents, families, and community members regarding public education.
- » Created and shared our online Education and Community Resource Guide.
- » Developed numerous topic-based resources, informational tip sheets, and trainings.
- » Fostered partnerships and coalitions that focus on issues that impact students and families.

Over the course of our first school year, we have been able to play an essential role in supporting students, parents, and families in the District of Columbia. In the coming year, our work will continue to focus on the development of resources to support students and families, expand our reach into our non-English speaking communities, and continue to ensure that the voices of students and families are at the forefront of our public education system.

We continue to recognize that meaningful parent and student engagement is the key to a system designed for the success of all of our students. It is our aim to enable our students, parents, and families to become effective advocates for themselves in ways that will impact their communities and the system of public education as a whole.

Sincerely,

  
Faith Gibson Hubbard



## OFFICE OF THE STUDENT ADVOCATE

### Staff

Faith Gibson Hubbard, Chief Student Advocate  
Dan Davis, Student Advocate (October 2016)  
Khadijah Williams, Program Associate

### 2015-2016 Student Advocate Fellows

Kevin Jackson, Jr.  
Farhana Rabbi

### History

Prior to the Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 (PERAA)<sup>1</sup>, the District had gone through several governance changes. Initially, community voice was incorporated through a local school board with budget, decision-making, and personnel power. This elected body was directly accountable to the community. The implementation of PERAA brought forth mayoral control and the removal of oversight of day-to-day operations from the School Board to the division of oversight into three bodies — the Executive Office of the Mayor, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), and the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). This meant that ground-level accountability was diverted to the Mayor, and the local School Board became the State Board of Education, an elected body responsible for advising the State Superintendent of Education on policy matters and state-level policy approval.

While mayoral control sought to provide additional accountability for a floundering school system, the change in oversight of day-to-day school matters to the Mayor served to limit community voice in ways that inadvertently removed a direct mechanism for

community members to raise questions regarding public education or to address school-related problems.

The Parent and Student Empowerment Act of 2013 recognized that community members needed a direct advocate, within the levels of government, to focus primarily and exclusively on making the newly complex education system more accessible to the community. From that recognition, the Office of the Student Advocate was established.

### Legislative Mandate

The Parent and Student Empowerment Act of 2013<sup>2</sup> established the “Office of the Student Advocate to represent students and parents on issues regarding public education in the District of Columbia” in seven distinct ways:

**FIRST**, by providing outreach to students, parents, and guardians regarding public education in the District of Columbia;

**SECOND**, by supporting the education and achievement of all public school students and their families in interactions with school personnel through support and advocacy;

**THIRD**, by assisting in the facilitation of the school enrollment process for current students and prospective families;

**FOURTH**, by operating a public education hotline to answer questions and provide information regarding relevant public education resources and agency/organizational referrals;

**FIFTH**, if requested, serve as an advocate for students in conflict resolution proceedings before the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education;

**SIXTH**, to track trends and inquiries presented to the office and their referral or resolution;

And **SEVENTH**, to recommend policy changes, staff trainings, and strategies to improve the efficient and equitable delivery of public education services.<sup>2</sup>

### The Role of the Student Advocate: Our Uniqueness of Opportunity

Historically, there have been “struggles to define parent engagement in education... [this tension is embedded in] whether schools should be guided by the local knowledge of families and communities or by the expertise of professionals.”<sup>4,5</sup> This struggle also plagues public education in DC. The quality of our schools has improved, but voids persist, particularly in the areas of the integration of student, parent, and community voice.

“The public education system in DC is perceived as being overly complex, impenetrable and unwelcoming.”<sup>3</sup>

Our city’s newer system of public education governance “requires [stakeholders to have] an advanced level of...knowledge to gain access to government...to know where to go to seek help.”<sup>6</sup> Navigating the public education system in DC can be daunting. Understanding how the public education system should work for our individual students and families can be complex. Within this system, the Office of the Student Advocate plays a unique role in the DC education landscape as the only governance structure that combines the access and influence of a government agency with the direct, grassroots outreach necessary to serve our families and communities. Our office serves “to make the [public] school system more accessible and to boost parent engagement...and access to resources.”<sup>7</sup>

“The unevenness of engagement has yielded divergent experiences.”<sup>5</sup>

Our office aims to directly represent the voice of families and communities. To do this work, our office collaborates with and builds alliances and partnerships within our communities with the support of parents, government agencies, community-based organizations, and educators. Through advocacy and engagement, our office works to eliminate barriers to collaboration. We aim to foster the development of collaborative partnerships with government and community members to recommend and implement effective policies, programs, resources, and relationships that benefit our students and the continued improvement of our education system.

While many advocate offices sit within a nonprofit, government agency, or a school district, the structure of our office allows us to address community concerns on a systemic and day-to-day level by aligning community goals with those of other governmental goals, providing access to all levels of government, and closing silos. Through our day-to-day work engaging in active dialogue, the office is able to gain insight into the experiences that our students, families, and communities face and is thus able to develop responsive approaches to their challenges, barriers, and needs.

Our approach aims to:

1. Shift the balance of power in favor of our community members by convening stakeholders at all levels around topics of community importance;
2. Develop and support the knowledge base of students, parents, and community stakeholders;
3. Ensure that family and community perspectives are included in all relevant public education conversations; and
4. Mobilize community-level leadership in grassroots education advocacy.

As noted in two prominent reports about family engagement in the District, “engagement can



become more meaningful when adequate platforms are provided to the public.”<sup>8,6</sup> The Office of the Student Advocate serves as the vehicle through which meaningful engagement of students, families, and communities can be sustained on a citywide level in a collaborative way across all sectors. Our work provides an avenue to ensure that families and communities are equipped in such a way that they are informed, connected, and empowered to have full access to public education in the District of Columbia.

Our Mission

The mission of the Office of the Student Advocate is to support and empower DC residents to achieve equal access to public education through advocacy, outreach, and information services. In our work, we provide step-by-step assistance for students, parents, families, and community members to **be informed, be connected, and be empowered.** ■



UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES:  
Supporting and Addressing the Needs of Students and Families

The passage of PERAA created a “different set of challenges for community and public engagement.”<sup>5</sup> The shift in governance structures to support mayoral control requires parents or students who need assistance to have “an advanced level of political knowledge [in order] to gain access to [the] government.”<sup>6</sup> The unintended consequences of our education system reforms are evidenced through the lack of parent and student voice in decision-making and policy solution conversations. We have moved forward in ways that provide limited opportunity for parent and student voice. This “unevenness of engagement [and scarce opportunities for student and parent voice] has yielded divergent experiences,” thus creating a void in which parents, students, and communities feel unheard and disconnected.<sup>5</sup> This disconnect has fostered an environment where public education issues and disparities continue to exist.

Origins of the Office of the Student Advocate:

What was the education landscape prior to the Family & Student Empowerment Act of 2013?	How the Office of the Student Advocate was designed to alleviate these concerns:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 converted the local school board tasked with day-to-day with direct decision making authority and direct constituent accountability to mayoral control of the local school system. It created a State Board of Education with advisory role over “state-wide” education policy. It also temporarily eliminated the local school system’s Critical Response Team.</li><li>• Families began to voice concerns that they didn’t feel like they had a direct voice that was only accountable to them. The perception formed that the school system did not care or understand their own struggles.</li><li>• Parents also voiced concerns about having a lack of information in regards to the enrollment process and decision-making processes. Parents felt as though their children are overly disciplined and not supported.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Independent access point for residents and stakeholders to address systemic issues.</li><li>• Develop trainings, resources, presentations, and workshops to support DC families.</li><li>• Operate a public education hotline to answer questions and provide information regarding relevant public education resources and agency/organization referrals.</li><li>• Provide direct insight into the needs of students and families and propose recommendations to policymakers to address those concerns.</li></ul>

To fill this void, our work focuses on supporting students, parents, and communities from a community-based perspective and approach which: *“highlights relationship building, develops the capacity of parents [and students] to be leaders, and works to close the gaps in culture and power between [decision-makers and the community].”*<sup>9</sup> This approach requires conversation and partnership not only with parents, students, and the community but also government and community-based entities. This process unfolds in four ways:

- ▶ Through ongoing partnership and dialogue with other government agencies and community-based organizations that service students, families, and communities
- ▶ Gaining direct insight into the needs of families through our Request for Assistance hotline
- ▶ Through our community engagement and outreach efforts, which allows us to be actively connected to the needs of our students and their families
- ▶ Through active participation and thought-leadership on task forces, working groups, advisory committees, and panels

How Our Office Serves Families

- ▶ Through gaining insight into the needs of families and communities.
  - » Address questions about the public education system through Requests for Assistance to streamline the information gathering process for parents and students.
  - » Conduct dialogue-centered community surveys to gain input directly from the community regarding specific issues.
  - » Organize and participate in community events to establish relationships and provide opportunity for discussion.
  - » Develop partnerships and coalitions to engage in formal and informal discussions with community leaders, community based organizations, and government agencies to elevate community issues to the forefront.
- ▶ Connect students and families with resources and tools to address those needs or navigate the education landscape to help improve their ability to self-advocate.
  - » Provide one-on-one coaching.

- » Create resources and toolkits.
  - » Facilitate issue or community specific workshops/trainings.
  - » Make referrals to other organizations and agencies for further support.
- ▶ Interject parent, student, and community voice into the policy making and implementation process through special interest working groups to create solutions or work plans on specific issues of interest to the community (i.e. student discipline and truancy) in collaboration with partner agencies and stakeholders.

Community Engagement, Partnerships, and Coalitions

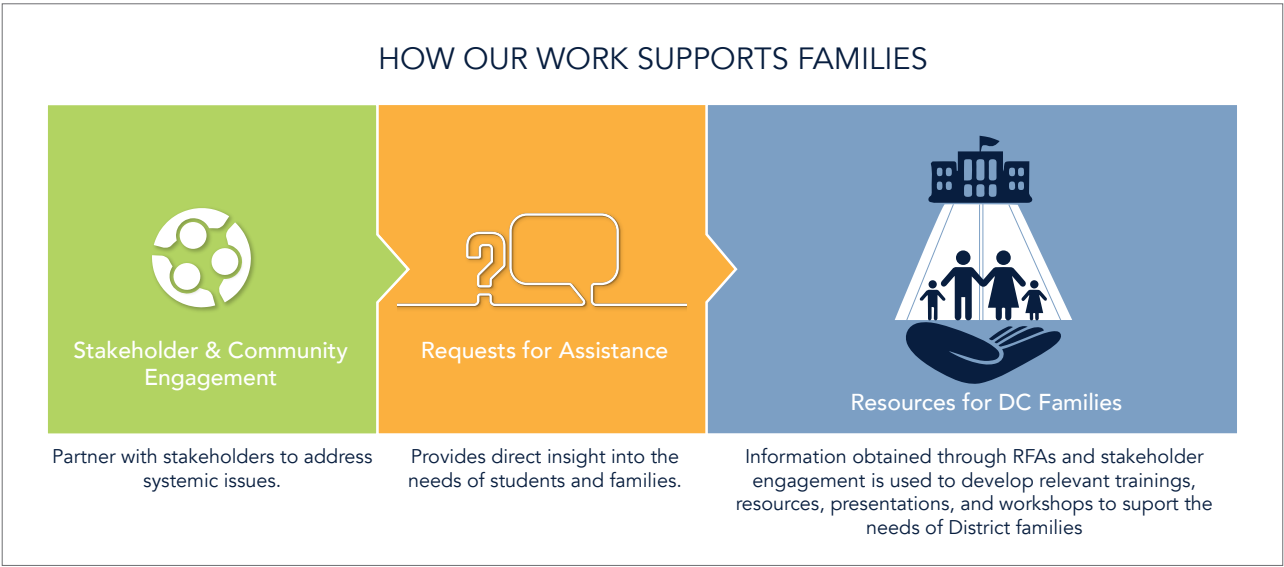
Our ability to work within the community to address the needs of students, families, and communities is made possible through our outreach efforts, stakeholder engagement, and development of partnerships and coalitions.<sup>10</sup> During the 2015-16 school year, our office had the opportunity to present and meet with numerous community groups, educators, parent groups, community-based organizations, and government stakeholders through our stakeholder listening tours. A snapshot of our school year 2015-16 outreach efforts include:

PARTNERSHIPS AND COALITIONS  
*Developing Traditional Decision-Maker Stakeholder Buy-in*

Office of the Deputy Mayor of Education  
Office of Family and Public Engagement, DC Public Schools  
Division of Specialized Instruction, DC Public Schools  
DC Public Charter School Board  
Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice  
Office of Student Wellness, DC Public Schools  
DC Department of Parks & Recreation  
Mayor’s Office of Community Relations & Services  
Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE)  
Council for Court Excellence  
Family Voices of Washington DC  
Man the Block, Richard Wright Public Charter Schools  
Collaborative Solutions for Communities  
Division of Health & Wellness, OSSE\*  
Advocates for Justice in Education  
DC Prep  
School Talk  
Children’s Law Center  
Ward Five Council on Education  
Ward 8 Council on Education  
Ward 7 Education Council  
Ward 4 Education Alliance  
District of Columbia Special Education Cooperative  
Office of Dispute Resolution, OSSE\*  
My School DC

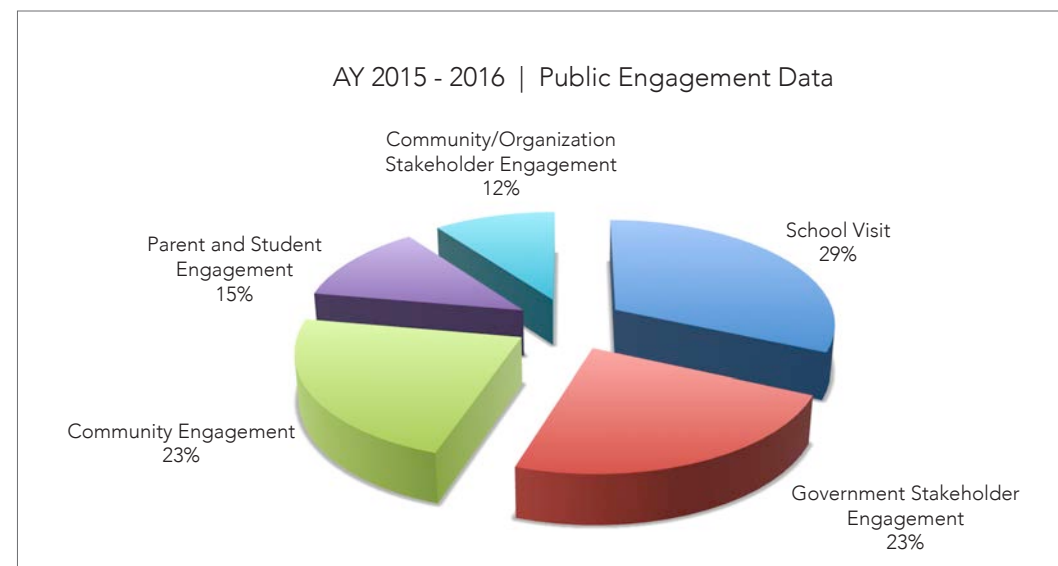
THOUGHT-LEADERSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT:  
*Encouraging Collaboration and Closing Silos*

Member, National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement (NAFSCE)  
Truancy Task Force, DME\*\*  
Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force, DME\*\*  
DC STEM Network Advisory Council, Carnegie Institute for Science  
School Safety and Safe Passage Working Group, DME\*\* and the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice  
The Institute for Educational Leadership’s National Family & Community Engagement Conference (2016)  
DC Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) Advisory Group, Multicultural Community Service (MCS)  
Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum panel discussion: Neighborhood Change & Public Schools  
Education Pioneers panel discussion: Why parental involvement matters?  
Teach for America’s panel discussion: The Power of Parent, Student & Community Voice in Education



Our work is influenced through our stakeholder engagement, individual discussions with parents, and strategic partnerships.

\*OSSE = Office of the State Superintendent of Education  
\*\*DME = Deputy Mayor for Education



*Our work requires that we engage with stakeholders on all levels to help ensure that our approach helps eliminate siloes and duplication.*

These efforts have afforded our office the opportunity to extend our services deeper into the community, even in the absence of sufficient capacity or staffing within our office. A direct result of our office’s relationship building and resource sharing, referrals from DC Council, State Board of Education, Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, DCPS central office, DC Public Charter School Board, other school administrators and community based organizations.

Our outreach to schools via school visits and opportunities for engagement with families are an essential component of our work. During the establishment of our office, we prioritized our outreach efforts to school leaders, parent organizations, and other community focused entities. In school year 2015-16, we were able to interact with 81 schools in a variety of ways, including school visits, meetings with school leadership, presentations at parent organizations, and attending school-related events.



In addition to our outreach efforts, we actively engage on social media through our Twitter handle @DC\_Advocate. Our regular engagement on Twitter has yielded us nearly 1,000 followers. Our Twitter page informs the community on relevant events, important campaigns, and the Office of the Student Advocate’s initiatives.

## Request for Assistance

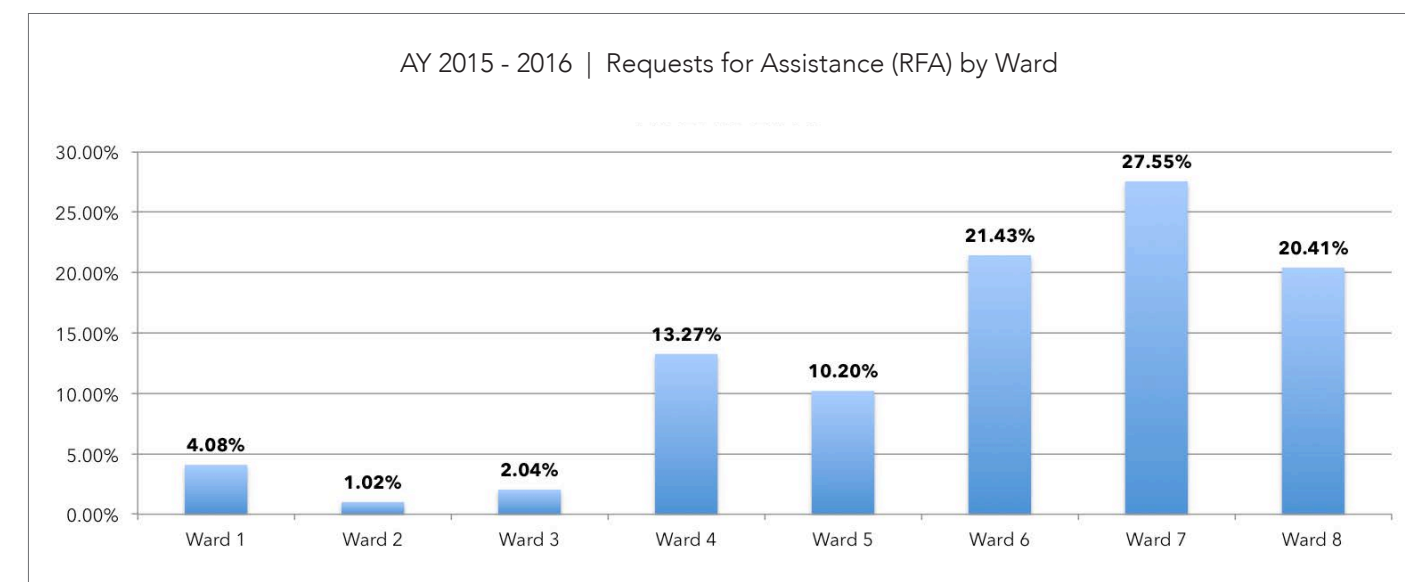
The Office of the Student Advocate operates a public education hotline, or the Request for Assistance (RFA) line. The RFA line supports our ability to work directly with students, parents, families, and community members to answer any public education related questions and inquiries.<sup>11</sup> We consider our RFA line to be a “311 system” for public education through which we provide relevant resources, information, and appropriate agency or organization referrals to meet the specific needs of the caller. In addition to resources and referrals, the RFA line allows our office to provide one-on-one coaching to families on a variety of public education issues.

We consider our RFA line to be a “311 system” for public education through which we provide relevant resources, information, and appropriate agency or organization referrals to meet the specific needs of the caller. In addition to resources and referrals, the RFA line allows our office to provide one-on-one coaching to families on a variety of public education issues.

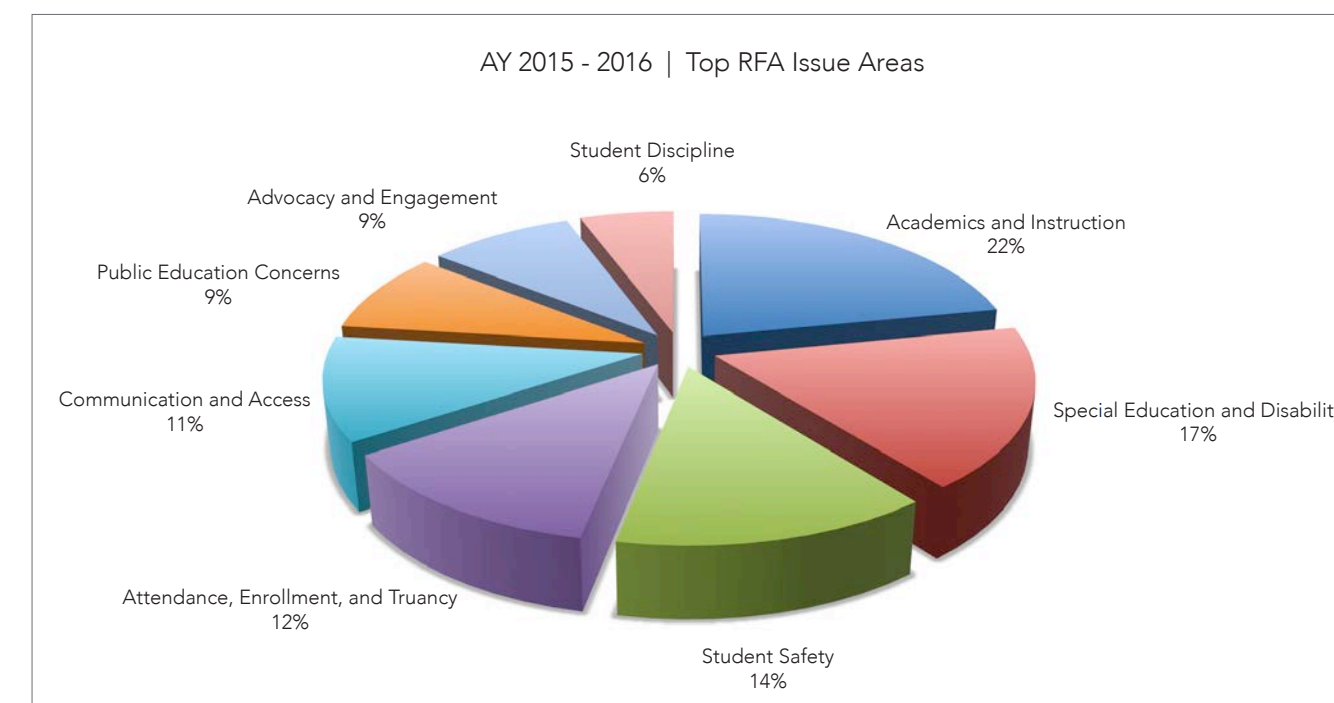
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Operate a public education hotline to answer questions and provide information about public education and to direct individuals to the appropriate agencies and offices within the District.<sup>2</sup>

Our work with students and parents allows us to connect the RFA inquiries to the development of issue-focused trainings, resources, and outreach efforts. These resources and initiatives work to tackle systemic issues and remove barriers for students and families. This work supports the ability of students and families to have equal access to a quality public education through the understanding and knowledge of how the system works on their behalf.

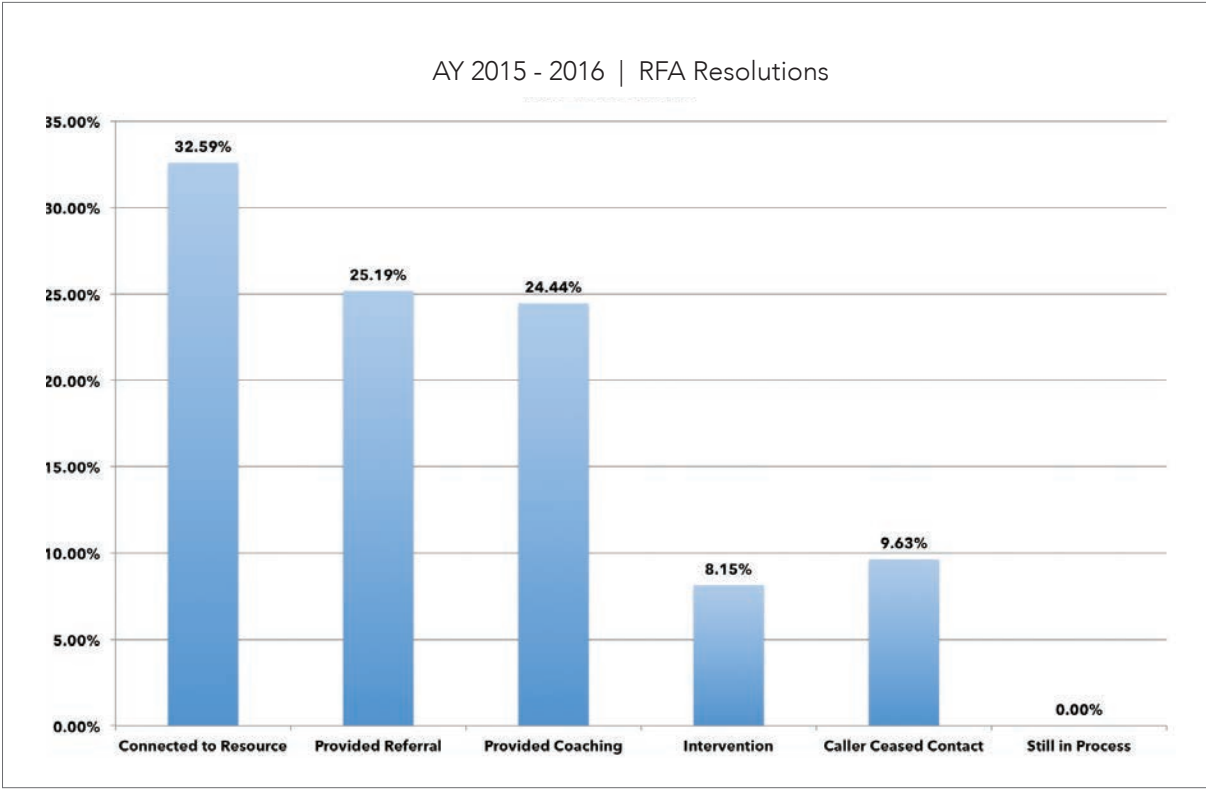


*The majority of the families who contact our office reside in Wards 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. Thus, much of our engagement in school year 2015-16 focused on these wards.*

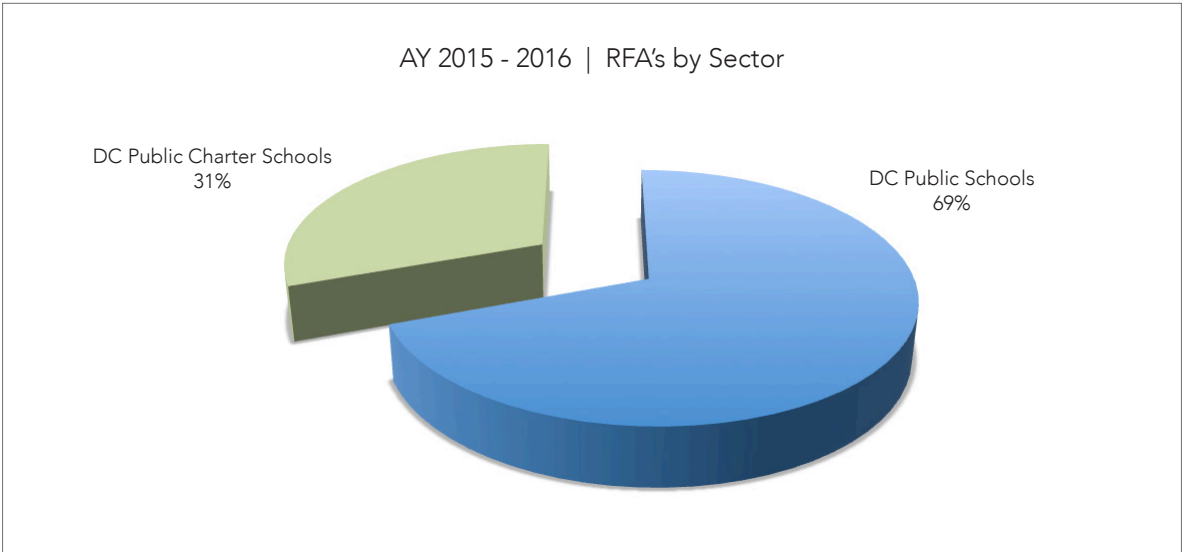


*Academics and Instruction, Special Education and Disability, and Student Safety were the top issues for which parents contacted our office for support. As a result, we focused on programming to address these specific issues.*





*In line with the stated goals of our office, more than 80% of our resolutions involved connecting families to resources, introducing families to the organizations that can best address their needs, and supporting parents to help address concerns in a way to foster self-advocacy skills.*



*Two-thirds of our requests came from traditional public school families. To further engage our charter school families, we have partnered with charter school leaders and engaged charter schools directly through communications and resource sharing.*

In school year 2015-16, we directly served 135 families through our RFA line. We also received missed calls from more than 80 families. Due to capacity constraints we were unable to answer the phone live, so callers were required to leave a message. We responded to RFA messages within 24-48 hours. This process was not ideal for most families who called our RFA line looking to speak with someone to address their question in real time.

Currently, in school year 2016-17, we answer the RFA line live between the hours of 9:00am - 5:30pm. Since changing to this process, we are already on track to surpass the number of calls addressed during the fall of 2015 and expect to interact with more families via our RFA line in school year 2016-17.

Requests for Assistance can also be submitted via our hotline at 202-741-4692 or online at <http://sboe.dc.gov/page/request-assistance>.

Education & Community Resource Guide

Outlined in our statute is a provision for creating and operating Public Education Resource Centers (PERCs) to advise students, parents, and families on all matters regarding public education.<sup>1</sup> In our inaugural school year, our office had extremely limited staff capacity, which made meeting this statutory provision a challenging task. It was our desire to seek creative solutions to meet this need. In lieu of a physical location presence, our office developed the online Education and Community Resource Guide to fill the void of centralized public education information and resources. We launched this resource guide on our website in August 2015.

*This guide serves as a starting place for self-advocacy.*

The online Education & Community Resource Guide is the first publicly available citywide initiative of its kind and is a continuously evolving resource that currently has more than 400 resource listings organized into 33 category areas. The guide provides students, parents, families, and communities across all 8 wards with a roadmap to getting started in navigating the public education landscape in DC. This guide was developed to highlight organizations and government agencies in the sphere of public education that provide critical services to residents across DC. This resource guide not only assists our office in fulfilling our mission but also gives anyone who uses it the ability to gain access to a plethora of resources, agencies, and organizations that directly impact education and educational attainment. This resource serves to acknowledge the work that is already being done by countless government agencies, offices, and community-based organizations while connecting families to those vital resources in one centralized location.

To ensure that all relevant and useful resources are available, we have created a supplemental document that is updated periodically with any new resources that have been brought to our awareness. The entire guide is updated on a quarterly basis.

The Education & Community Resource Guide can be found at <http://sboe.dc.gov/page/resource>. ■

“The Office may establish and operate public education resource centers throughout the District to provide students, parents, and guardians with information about educational programs and school choice, including information about the application, enrollment, and assignment process.”





### SECTION III

## OBSERVATIONS AND EVIDENCE OF OUR WORK

### Family and Community Engagement

The need and importance of student, family and community engagement in public education is not a new idea. From its inception, “public education has always been tied to democracy and its fundamental principle of public participation in governance.” <sup>12,13,14</sup>

Public engagement in public education is rooted in the “promise of bridging the gaps among parents, central office administrators, teachers, community groups, and distinct constituencies.” <sup>15</sup> PERAA envisioned mechanisms for engagement: (1) the establishment of the public education ombudsman, (2) the requirement for DCPS to obtain parental feedback and hold public meetings, (3) the establishment of the Interagency Collaboration and Services Integration Commission to coordinate services provided to children and families, and lastly, (4) required the State Board of Education to hold public meetings monthly for citizen input. <sup>16</sup> Beyond the aforementioned provisions, PERAA was not more prescriptive about public engagement, which has led to inconsistencies in the practice and implementation of public engagement efforts in DC.

In practice, we have seen that some LEAs, or schools, handle the process of engagement with families and communities better than others. This inconsistency of engagement and communication is not only a recurring theme highlighted in our work but it is a serious challenge for families. Calls to our RFA line have captured this challenge in two topic areas: Communication & Access (which make up 11% of RFA calls) and Advocacy & Engagement (which make up 9% of RFA calls). Anecdotally, our engagement in schools and communities have highlighted bright-spots in parent and student engagement, while other instances have highlighted a need for improvement of engagement activities or the creation of such a process. For example, some schools have hired a family engagement or parent coordinator, which assists in providing resources to families, facilitating avenues for parent engagement, and in some instances added specific services to support the needs of students and families (i.e. the addition of more mental health services for students and families). On the other end of the spectrum, we have heard from families that schools often do not engage them unless there is an issue or problem. Connecting with parents at the beginning of the school year allows for a positive initial interaction, which will set the tone for further engagement with parents and students.

When families reach out to the office for assistance, the challenges surrounding communication are usually at the root of their inquiry. We understand that schools must deal with myriad issues on a daily basis, but a school's ability to understand the art of cultivating relationships with families is essential. Like most public education systems, our city has struggled with a legacy of distrust that can only be reversed through opening the lines of communication with families. Developing mechanisms to create opportunities for sharing and transparency are the building blocks for trust. Taking good faith steps to encourage the involvement of families by tapping into their expertise as parents and community members signals families they are welcome in the school environment and fosters relationship

building and nurtures effective communication before issues arise. <sup>17</sup> This welcoming environment fosters the ability to “create [and support] constructive dialogue” <sup>18</sup> early and often between schools and families. Such dialogue allows schools to provide clarity to families on the policies and procedures that govern the school as well as the school's expectations of families and students. Creating a set of shared norms that are understood by both parents and school administrators provides clarity in the process of framing the roles and responsibilities of both the schools and families.

Expanding engagement opportunities to families and communities that go beyond the school level acknowledges their role as “builders of the world around them” and values their individual expertise. Ensuring that the voices of families and communities are interjected into the broader conversations of education reform in this city remains a priority of our office. This commitment is reflected in the other work of our office, which is situated in a belief of deliberative democracy, inclusion, and coproduction. <sup>22,23,24</sup>

Engaging families and communities in thoughtful decision-making fosters relationships, develops trust, and supports buy-in to sustainable policy solutions and reforms. Avenues for in depth, ongoing engagement opportunities exist, such as the State Board of Education's student representatives and student advisory committee, DCPS' Chancellor's Parent Cabinet, the DC Public Charter School Board's parent and student advisory committees, and OSSE's special education State Advisory Panel on Special Education. Membership of these opportunities is open to all but is usually determined through a selective process; which limits the size of participation. What does not exist are a variety of opportunities for families and communities to engage in a way that provides a low barrier to entry that are inclusive of other decision making opportunities outside of large scale processes (i.e. the Chancellor search or student assignment).

“

...increased interest in family and community engagement programs as a means of increasing equity, cultural responsiveness, and collaboration in schools. <sup>19,20,21</sup>



### EVIDENCE OF OUR WORK

#### Ward 7 Parent Empowerment Summit Series

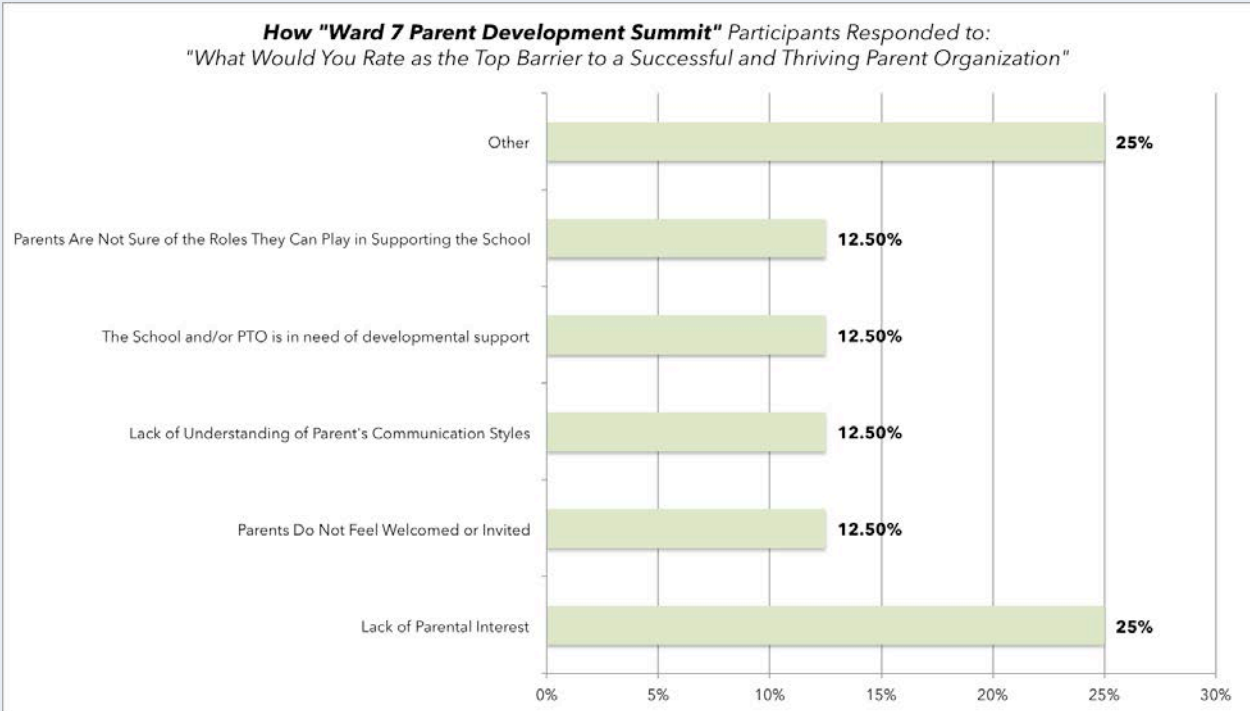
We believe that parents are the very foundation upon which our communities are built and a quality public education system is fostered. The legacy of barriers to parent engagement entry and the recent transition of education in Ward 7, as well as other areas of the city, is a narrative that has always included the voices of parents and the community. To assist in providing inclusive opportunities for engagement for Ward 7 families, our office — in partnership with the Ward 7 Education Council and the Ward 7 State Board of Education Member Karen Williams — understood the need to create a forum in Ward 7 that continues to support the voices of parents and communities in education while also nurturing and supporting development of parent organizations and parent leadership. With that focus in mind, we worked to develop and facilitate a parent organization and leadership development summit series for Ward 7 parents who have children in DCPS or public charter schools. This provided the opportunity to better equip parents with tools necessary to best engage themselves and other parents in their schools.

This series was not only focused on equipping the organization with the tools to revive or establish a parent organization but also focused on building capacity. This series provided tools

“

...fostering parent leadership in the schools and in the community...[nurtures] a strong sense of community.”

to support parent organizations in a way that ensures that they can thrive and have longevity; create a communication forum for support amongst parents and parent organizations; and foster engagement by leveraging parent power and voice. In addition to the partnership with Ward 7, our office has plans to work in partnership with the Ward Five Council on Education to create a public education parent advisory and leadership group in Ward 5. Our office has also engaged in conversations with Ward 8 parents and community members about working together on a similar model for building parent capacity in Ward 8. ■



*This graphic describes the common barriers parents experienced in engaging with their parent teacher organization. The barriers noted indicate a need for more consistent engagement, clearer feedback, and a multidimensional approach to engage all parents at all levels.*

Engaging families and communities in our current conversations about public education issues, and other areas where we are seeking viable policy solutions, is necessary for the sustainability of the policy actions.<sup>25</sup> We have examples of successful processes that can be replicated.<sup>26</sup> We have to design engagement opportunities in a way that is free of silos and focused on collaboration. Taking such steps will allow our city to capture and amplify the voices of not only our frequently engaged critics and supporters who routinely contribute, but also the voices that are not always at the table. Broadening the community of decision-makers creates access and understanding of the policy decisions that are made while also creating a more equitable system of public education for the students of the District of Columbia.

Student Discipline

Student discipline inquiries only accounted for six percent of RFAs in school year 2015-16. What is most interesting about the low percentage of student discipline RFAs is the high correlation between questions regarding student discipline and other inquiry areas such as special education, student safety, or even issues of truancy. Parents communicated a lack of understanding regarding student discipline policies. One parent, for example, did not understand what her child’s discipline notification meant. Another parent needed a stay in an expulsion hearing

because she did not know how to advocate for her child. We have a diverse set of LEAs and yet many parents and students do not understand the different policies that govern the individual public charter LEAs and the use of Chapter 25 (of the DC Municipal Regulations) that governs DCPS’ discipline policy.

In their March 2015 report, *Equity In School Discipline*, the Council for Court Excellence (CCE) examined DC public school discipline policies.<sup>27</sup> Utilizing school year 2012-13 data, CCE highlighted the varied policies, between DCPS and public charters, as well as the challenges faced by students and parents regarding school discipline policies. Our office faced similar challenges in addressing the school discipline inquiries of DCPS and public charter school families. Connecting families to resources and giving them the appropriate referrals is one aspect, but connecting families to resources that provide a meaningful understanding of the policies and how these policies impact their particular child is another. The Office of the State Superintendent of Education’s (OSSE) Equity Reports<sup>28</sup> and the school and state report cards<sup>29</sup> are useful tools, but unfortunately the family and community awareness of these documents is lacking.

In June 2016, OSSE released LEA discipline guidance<sup>30</sup> in order to:

- 1. "...assist LEAs in meeting their obligations with federal and local laws and regulations regarding administration of student discipline."
- 2. "...ensure that all students are provided with equal access to educational opportunities... [and] to avoid student discipline policies that have a disproportionate impact on particular groups of students and instead create learning environments that will allow all students to thrive."
- 3. "...provides LEAs...with an overview of federal and local laws that affect school discipline, key frameworks for understanding and addressing behavior, recommended practices, and a range of local and national resources."

This guidance is a step in the right direction, but does not speak to challenges families experience regarding the diversity of discipline policies. Many parents, for example, do not understand the differences between policies or where to find them. Many parents initially enroll their children within DCPS, which has one policy for all traditional public schools. As they move to the charter system, they do not always realize that the DCPS discipline policy does not apply to charter schools. Gearing OSSE’s discipline guidance towards helping parents understand how charter LEA and DCPS discipline policies, and the policy implementation, differ would be a valuable tool for families. This tool would greatly support families as they make school selections for their child and ensure that families are keenly aware of the variations in LEA discipline policies.

Even in the midst of useful resources and tools, challenges remain in the following areas:

- » Clarity of due process rights for students
- » The impartiality of the "hearing officer"<sup>24</sup>
- » Academic support available for students during short, medium, and long-term suspensions
- » Vast difference between LEA policies

Understanding the nuanced discipline policies and procedures that LEAs use to implement such policies proved to be convoluted and more opaque than our office than we would have expected. As we worked to support families by unpacking the policy variations, our office found gaining access to the specific LEA policies to be an additional barrier. The lack of guidance in interpreting and utilizing discipline policies make it difficult for parents to choose the right school option to meet their child’s needs. Our office initially had some difficulty obtaining discipline policies for all schools; that barrier is burdensome and potentially discouraging for families who are not equipped with the resources of a government office.

Creating more clarity around discipline processes is necessary in order to help parents understand how differences in approach can impact their child. Additionally, developing a centralized source of discipline policy guidance, geared towards parents and their concerns, will provide parents additional information to make the right decision for their children. This guidance would also help schools in educating parents on their rights in a way that supports school culture and positive communication.





## EVIDENCE OF OUR WORK

### LEA Student Discipline Analysis and Resource Tools for Families

Our office, in partnership with Council for Court Excellence (CCE), conducted a comparative analysis of student discipline policies for DCPS and each of the public charter LEAs. This analysis was conducted in order to develop resource tools for families in an effort to support their school selection and transition processes. These tools will allow parents and students to explore their school options in a more informed way.

Our office collected all of the school discipline policies from 62 public charter LEAs, in addition to DCMR Chapter 25. CCE analyzed the policies using mutually agreed upon criteria for analysis focused on eight areas; this criteria was also inclusive of some of the criteria from CCE's previous discipline analysis. The criteria included:

1. Zero tolerance
2. Due process rights and procedures
3. Partiality of the hearing officer
4. Accommodations for students with special needs
5. In-school suspensions
6. Police involvement
7. Alternative instruction/remote participation
8. Language accessibility

In our analysis, we saw a reduction in the percentage of schools with zero tolerance policies and an increase in additional due process protections for students with special needs. Although transparency has increased around requirements for a notice of disciplinary hearing, the challenges of communicating those hearing rights so families are aware of that protection still creates an uneven power dynamic. Appeal rights for students have also increased but our analysis raised additional questions regarding the impartiality of hearing officers and variations of this process between LEAs. A very small percentage of LEAs have disciplinary hearings or appeals officers who are unaffiliated with the school.

By virtue of DCPS' longer LEA tenure in the District, their process of disciplinary hearings and due process rights are far more prescriptive than their charter LEA counterparts; DCMR Chapter 25 details very specific steps for this process. DCPS has access to the Office of Administrative Hearings, which provides the structure and institutional knowledge to address these concerns. Conversely, some charter LEAs are simultaneously rowing and building the boat. In some instances, charter LEAs have to add policies as issues arise since they might not have the level of institutional knowledge of various disciplinary concerns. A lack of prescription and institutional knowledge in charter schools means that they might not have a tried and true practice for addressing common issues.

Students and families, in both school sectors, need clear disciplinary policies that contain predictable outcomes and are able to accommodate the uniqueness of every student we educate. Prescriptive discipline policies do not always lead to a corrective learning experience for students with specific needs. A more streamlined process with built-in flexibility for both school sectors will help aid students and parents in understanding what to expect from their school. Challenges exist within both sectors, but student and parental input, in the development and updating of discipline policies, can assist in alleviating some of these challenges.

One troubling finding of our analysis was the lack of access to alternative instruction, or remote participation opportunities for students dealing with disciplinary actions. In our analysis, we found evidence of alternative instruction policies mentioned (such as limited afterschool assignment help or the ability to make up assignments), but most were not very enriching for students nor did they support the academic progress of students. As noted in the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education 2014-15 Annual Report, "...charter schools do not have a legal obligation to offer such services ..."<sup>31</sup> This challenge is not only found within public charter policies but also within DCPS. DCPS' means for alternative instruction, CHOICE Academy, is designed to provide the academic support students need during long-term disciplinary actions, but per the observation from the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education 2014-15 Annual Report:

*"...[DCPS] students with long-term suspensions did not receive alternative instruction. CHOICE Academy, the DCPS alternative school, does not accept students until they have received a final decision from the Office of Administrative Hearings. This means that students who are put out of their DCPS school before a suspension under emergency situations typically do not receive instruction for a week or more while awaiting a hearing."<sup>31</sup>*

The absence of clear alternative instruction procedures and processes for LEAs is concerning and in many ways contributes to deficits in student academic gains and access to quality education. Lack of alternative instruction causes loss of academic learning for that period of time, further contributing to the opportunity gap for students. Assignments given during time out of school are a good start, but they do not make up for instructional time or provide support to students should they need it. Finding ways to ensure that students' needs are met in situations of longer-term disciplinary actions is vital. The Office for the Ombudsman in their 2015 annual report cited restorative and trauma-informed practices to address the needs of students in a compassionate way.<sup>27,31</sup> We support this recommendation.

The development of the final resource tools is pending. It is our hope to utilize our analysis to support families in their proactive and reactive needs surrounding school discipline policies. What this process highlighted most was the absence of parent and student voice in the process of policy development. We acknowledge that LEAs do their best to follow guidance and best practices in the creation of their policies, but, once implemented, opportunities for regular check-in and evaluation are essential. ■



Special Education

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law that ensures children and students with disabilities receive a “free and appropriate public education” that allows for accommodations and supports developed to meet their specific needs.<sup>33</sup> National data (from the school year 2013-14) reports that “roughly 6.5 million children, or 13 percent of school-aged children” are receiving special education services.<sup>34</sup> The number of students receiving special education services in the District is slightly above the national average at 15.6 percent.<sup>35</sup> Certain subgroups, such as African Americans, are overrepresented in the percentage of the special education student population.<sup>41</sup> Nationally, African Americans make up 15 percent of the total special education population. In contrast, DC special education student population is 87 percent African American. Therefore, special education and its impact must be addressed with an eye towards the needs of our particular population.

Students With An IEP<sup>36</sup>

Year(s): 5 selected | School Type: All | Type: Number

Data Provided by: DC Action for Children

Location	School Type	Data Type	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
District of Columbia	Total	Number	10,130	10,644	11,043	12,908	11,412
	DCPS	Number	6,493	6,484	6,614	8,010	6,672
	Public Charter	Number	3,637	4,160	4,429	4,898	4,740
	Other/Contracted	Number	0	0	0	0	0

Since the establishment of our office, the majority of calls that we have received on our RFA hotline have dealt with issues related to special education. In school year 2015-16, 17 percent of the calls we received on our RFA line focused specifically on special education inquiries. This inquiry area was our second highest next to inquiries of academics and instruction. Interestingly, this inquiry area might actually be underrepresented due to the fact that, in many instances, questions regarding special education are tied to other topic areas, such as student discipline, academics and instruction, communication and access, or student safety. It is common to receive calls that start out with questions unrelated to special education but are later connected to a need or question regarding special education services. There seems to consistently be a correlation between many questions asked in our office and special education. This demonstrates that there is still a lot of need. Many organizations help explain this information, but families are not getting to them, and there has been little help for parents to access these resources. We fill this void by helping to connect parents to these resources in one centralized place.

Although the IEP process for special education services is fairly streamlined through standardized processes that local education agencies (LEAs) must follow, understanding of the process from the perspective of parents and students is uneven. Calls to our RFA line range from: (1) parents confused about the IEP process; (2) parents who are upset and frustrated due to a lack of services for their child; (3) parent or guardian lack clarity regarding their rights and how to activate those rights; (4) parents who have noticed issues with their child (i.e discipline or academic issues) and are trying to navigate next steps, perhaps an evaluation, but do not know where to get advice or guidance. As a resource, our office connected families to agencies and organizations that could support them in their educational needs, provided parents with information about the special education process, and referred them to agencies that can best address their concerns, including legal concerns.

The need is great. Even in light of national and local laws, parents and students do not understand the complex and very nuanced laws surrounding special education. Furthermore, parents and students do not clearly understand how to activate their legal rights regarding special education services. Many parents and students do not understand the role they can play during the IEP process, questions that should be raised, or the due process rights that ensure fairness of process. On occasion, our office interacts with parents who have developed the savvy to wade through the complex process of special education, but more often we encounter parents who are in need of encouragement and guidance.

A plethora of resources exist and are available to support families through the special education process. Although there is not a lack of resources, the challenge has been communicating to families what community-based organizations exist to support their specific needs and making the appropriate connections. In order to support the needs of their students, families must also come to the table with ideas and learning solutions to support the needs of their child. This speaks to a need for centralization and a collaborative approach. Countless organizations and government entities work to support the interests and needs of families but often times the work is done in silos absent of collaboration.



EVIDENCE OF OUR WORK

Ward-Based Special Education “Know Your Rights” Panel Discussions

Approximately 15.6 percent of students have individual education plans (IEPs) and receive special education services in DC. In addition to students with IEPs, 504 plans also provide supports and accommodations for students. One of the very first calls we received after establishing our RFA hotline was in regards to special education. In school year 2015-16, 17 percent of all RFA calls were special education inquiries and questions. This information, coupled with the information we received from our RFAs, demonstrated that supporting students and families in the area of special education became one of our top priorities.

“Conduct...information sessions...to provide current and prospective public school students and their parents or guardians with information about public education.”<sup>2</sup>

After reaching out to various stakeholders and organizations, we determined that our office should work to address this issue through information, resource sharing, and collaboration. Our office developed and implemented a “Know Your Rights” informational session on special education issues and tools for advocacy. Through collaborative relationships with the ward-based education councils (the Ward Five Council on Education and the Ward 4 Education Alliance) and partnership with the ward State Board of Education members, this series of informational sessions on special education rights were held in Wards 4, 5, and 8.

The goal of this series was to equip parents with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about their child’s educational needs. Navigating the complexity of national and local laws that govern special education is overwhelming. This series worked to support families with vital tools and relevant information for their advocacy efforts on behalf of their child to:

- 1. Prompt an evaluation,
- 2. Understand the IEP and 504 processes,
- 3. Raise questions regarding special education services
- 4. Provide tools to support effective communication for engaging schools,



5. Understand the basic provisions of the law, and
6. Understand how to activate their rights.

A panel of experts, comprised of parents and education professionals, discussed the special education process in DC, with a focus on the 504 plan & IEP processes, how to overcome issues that might arise during the process, and focused on unpacking the nuances of federal and local special education laws. All of the panelists discussed their role in the various special education processes and ways that their office or organization supports students and families. This discussion series was a collaborative effort that brought special education resources directly to families and supported the untangling of the various components of the law to make it more digestible. The discussion worked to provide families with proactive and reactive tools in order to advocate for their child and the services they need. This series provided resources to families that would allow them to be fully engaged in the special education process. Most importantly, this series brought a diverse group of traditional stakeholders directly to families in order to address their questions and concerns in a very accessible way.

Panelists included: Advocates for Justice & Education, Children’s Law Center, Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, OSSE’s Office of Dispute Resolution, DC Special Education Cooperative, OSSE’s State Advisory Panel on Special Education, Family Voices of Washington DC, DCPS Division of Health & Wellness and the Division of Specialized Instruction, and DC Prep. ■

The challenges that students and families experience when it comes to special education rarely occur in silos and almost always require a varied approach to a solution. A topic such as special education is extremely nuanced and requires a diverse group of panelists in order to truly meet the needs of students and their families. The success of the discussion series was made possible through intergovernmental and community-based organizational partnership.

In the coming year, we will continue this special education information series with topics on behavior intervention plans and additional parent and student advocacy workshops.

Cross-sector and intergovernmental collaboration are vital. What we have learned in our work is that, in order to increase capacity and reach deeper into the community, coalition building is required to support families in the collaborative manner they deserve. Families expect us to be connected and to provide services and resources in a seamless way to meet their specific needs. With this need in mind, we recommend a focus and commitment to cross-sector collaboration in serving students and families with special education needs. Broadening the coalitions that currently exist and fostering more partnerships for services and resources should be done through a more coordinated approach. This approach would afford families the opportunity to obtain vital information for all special education programs through one coordinated and collaborative source.

## Student Safety & Safe Passage

Fourteen percent of our school year 2015-16 RFA inquiries pertained to student safety. DC is no stranger to the challenges facing students as they travel to and from school and the issues that also arise inside the school building regarding student safety. Families report students being bullied. LEAs do their best to be proactive and prevention focused, yet we often focus our attentions on a reactive approach to addressing safety concerns, rather than an interconnected collaborative approach that is proactive in nature.

“The purpose of the Chief Advocate is to advocate on behalf of current and prospective public school students and their parents or guardians...”<sup>2</sup>

As a city, we have developed infrastructure to support the safety of our students in and out of the school building. The work of the Metropolitan Police Department’s School Safety Division, in partnership with the LEAs, is a signal of progress and collaboration but blind spots persist. As a city, it is essential for us to find opportunities to continue to connect to the work being done at the city and individual LEA levels with our communities.



## EVIDENCE OF OUR WORK

### Safe Passage Community & Collaboration Working Group

The safe passage for our students, as they travel to and from school, is of the utmost importance to us all. Each year, at various times of the year, we hear about incidents regarding the safety of our students in transit — as they walk or commute by public transportation to school. For instance, families often speak of the need for their children to be safe from harm both inside and outside the school. Working with all stakeholders to address these concerns is vital.

Because of our work with families and communities, our office recognized a need to join the efforts around the safe passage and support collaborative actions. This initiative was focused on offering support to the policy-solution work of the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) with the inclusion of parent, student, and community voice in order to address the issues in a more comprehensive and collaborative way.<sup>38</sup> To meet this need, we established a Safe Passage Community and Collaboration Working Group comprised of government agencies, leaders of community-based organizations, and administrators of public education governance systems.

Members of the working group include:

Office of the Student Advocate (DC State Board of Education), Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety & Justice, Office of Family & Public Engagement (DCPS), Mayor’s Office of Community Relations & Services, DC Public Charter School Board, Citywide Youth Bullying Prevention Program (Office of Human Rights), Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE), Man the Block (Richard Wright Public Charter School), Collaborative Solutions for Communities, Department of Parks & Recreation’s Roving Leaders, and OSSE’s Division of Health & Wellness.

In our work, we navigate this issue by framing the definition of and context for safe passage to develop proactive solutions, in ways that apply directly to the context of the District of Columbia and our very unique education landscape. The deliverables of our working group include:

**Cross-Jurisdictional Review** of safe passage programmatic best practices and components.

**Analysis of Existing DC Safe Passage programs** based on the “6 E’s” prescribed by the National Center for Safe Routes to School: education, encouragement, engineering, enforcement, evaluations, and equity.<sup>39</sup>

**Community Surveying** with the goal of capturing, sharing, and amplifying community voice regarding issues of safe passage.

- » School-facing survey on safe passage challenges, needed supports, and relevant contacts
- » Dialogue-centered community surveying in high-traffic areas. Questions include: (1) How do parents and students feel about safe routes? (2) What are the transportation or safety concerns? (3) How can they be communicated with schools, district leaders, elected officials, community organizations, and law enforcement?

**Safe Passage Resource Toolkit** — to create and sustain the safe passage of our students and communities based on the “6 E’s” from National Safe Routes to School.

**Social media campaign supporting safe passage** — to engage all community members in supporting our students and #DCSafeRoutes within our neighborhoods.

All of the resources mentioned above are available on our website at <http://sboe.dc.gov/page/safe-passage>.

This work allows our city to address the recurring issue of safe passage from a multipronged, collaborative approach that is inclusive of not only the definitional lens of safe passage, but most importantly, supports student, parent, and community voice in the process. ■

### Enrollment, Clarity of Process, & Public Education Concerns

Evaluations and reports on our current system of public education have consistently noted a need for resources, information, and “administrative operations to be transparent, [and] easily accessible” to the public.<sup>14</sup> The ability for families and communities to easily access public education resources and information works to not only improve accountability but also support and foster trust.

LEAs have moved to create systems to support families in gaining valuable information and access to resources. Two great examples of work being done in the District to address this need are DCPS Office of Family and Public Engagement and the family engagement efforts of individual public charter LEAs. Several community-based organizations serve as useful partners to families in assisting with their resource and information needs (i.e. the family collaborative and other community-focused organizations). OSSE also provides a plethora of information on their website in addition to the LearnDC website. Other DC government agencies also provide a variety of resources for families but even with the best of intentions, many times those resources do not make it to the targeted audience. Various organizations offer issue specific (i.e. special education, student discipline, etc.) information that benefits families in a variety of areas. Lastly, My School DC, the common lottery for DC public schools, not only supports families in school choice and enrollment but also offers a variety of school information on their website. Given the breadth of information and resources available, navigating that information can at times be challenging. It can be difficult for parents to discern when to use which resource and where to find particular sources of information that are focused on their specific needs.

In school year 2015-16, the issue regarding generalized public education questions and a need for resources showed up in three categories — Academics & Instruction (22%); Attendance, Enrollment, & Truancy (12%); and Public Education Concerns (9%). A subset of the calls focused on a need to gain clarity on a host of processes stemming from enrollment to school choice as well as enrichment opportunities to issue specific resources/referrals. As we continued to search for resources and information for families, it became clear that a need for a centralized place for resources and information was vital. The process of centralizing information was not an effort to recreate the wheel but to bring together all of the resources and information that families need, while also highlighting the great work of a variety of government and community based organizations. The PERAA evaluation spoke to a need for centralizing data, but a part of their evaluation also noted a need to make “basic information about the school system available in one place...that is readily accessible online to parents, [and] the community.”<sup>14</sup>

In the development of our online Education and Community Resource Guide (as mentioned on page 12) and our other online resources, we worked to address the questions and concerns that current and prospective public education families have raised.



### EVIDENCE OF OUR WORK

#### Online Resources

The Office of the Student Advocate aims to serve as a hub for information for both current and prospective families regarding information on public education and issue that impact education. Our efforts to meet the needs of students and families has led us to develop several resources, toolkits, and tip sheets that are available on our website. In addition to our online Education & Community Resource Guide, our website also has resources on topics that provide support to students and their families in all aspects of education and achievement. Resource topic areas include:

- ✓ Effective Communication
- ✓ Enrollment
- ✓ Graduation Requirements
- ✓ Parent Leadership
- ✓ Advocacy & Lobbying Toolkit
- ✓ Special Education & Other School Supports
- ✓ Student Leadership
- ✓ Testing & Assessments

Our online resources provide families the ability to:

1. Better understand our public education system and how it is structured,
2. Advocate effectively on their child’s behalf through tools,
3. Foster good relationships between families and school officials by providing step-by-step supports on how to effectively interact, and,
4. Understand various other public education-related topics that families and communities need to know.

All of these resources can be found at <http://sboe.dc.gov/page/advocacy>. ■

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Support student academic achievement by supporting current and prospective public school students and their parents or guardians in their interactions with public school personnel.”<sup>2</sup>

The primary focus of our office is to empower students, parents, and families to be their own best advocates. Our community interactions through the RFA line and other forums of dialogue and engagement indicate that students and families find it difficult to navigate their concerns due to the incredibly unique and complex governance structure of D.C.’s education systems. Families often feel discouraged by what they perceive to be the lack of support and clear guidance from agencies and offices. Our engagement with families, coalition building, and outreach provides us the information necessary to develop a variety of targeted trainings, information sessions, and workshops to help empower families and further support such student and parent leadership.



The lack of systematic coordination within the city makes it difficult for parents and other stakeholders to support each other towards the education of our city's children, resulting in duplication, inefficiency and lack of clarity in meeting the needs of families. In the Office of the Student Advocate, we work to fill this void by staying knowledgeable about the various policies and programs within our school systems, building relationships among the individual leaders and groups, and connecting students and families with the resources they need. Through the variety of resources, toolkits, and guides that we have within our office, we see ourselves as a connecting point for information and resources that are otherwise difficult to navigate. This is where our work directly serves the community and provides the most impact. ■



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Family Engagement

Parent, students, and communities must be at the forefront of our public education system. The voices of families and communities must be amplified. Families and communities must be a welcome presence at the decision-making table for our public education processes and policies. To that end, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Design a framework for the regular citywide engagement of families and communities on issues of public education and policy development decision-making processes. Make the authentic engagement of families and communities a mandatory part of the policy process and find room for their voices at the decision-making table.
2. Schools should work to create an environment that is welcoming to parents and students. Establishing such an environment signals to families that they are valued and provides a forum for open communication and a feeling of mutual respect.
3. Schools should utilize supports to develop and maintain parent organization models that fit the particular culture and needs of their schools. A 'one size fits all' approach will not benefit every school. Designing an organization that can support family engagement, while also supporting the needs of students, is vital. Ensuring mechanisms to reduce power imbalances is a necessary component for success.
4. Schools must work to provide clarity to parents and students about the policies and procedures that govern individual schools and clearly outline the expectations for parents.

### Student Discipline

Designing disciplinary processes and policies requires the input of parents and students in order to be successful. Partnerships with parents, students, and administrators mean that there will be increased buy-in for discipline policies. A collaborative approach also means that parents, students, and administrators are all engaged in and supportive of the policy. To that end, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Equity reports are a useful tool. There needs to be an increased focus on ensuring that families and students know about their existence and usefulness.
2. The development of a student discipline parent and student advisory board, which would have the authority to review individual LEA discipline policies, provide policy recommendations, and necessary implementation supports.<sup>40</sup>
3. Schools should go over discipline policies during the beginning of the school year and also provide information on appeals and alternatives to suspension.

4. Additional focus and implementation of the positive behavior interventions and supports, in addition to other restorative justice practices and supports, is essential.
5. The lack of comprehensive alternative instruction policies to support the academic achievement needs of students while out of school for disciplinary reasons is alarming. In order to ensure policies that are student focused in nature, it is vital that we continue to move in the direction of developing and implementing best practices for alternative instruction (i.e. offsite tutoring) that support the academic and social-emotional needs of students.

## Special Education

Navigating special education laws, policies, and processes remain challenging. Supporting families with a collaborative approach provides great outcomes for students and families. To that end, we offer the following recommendations:

1. A need remains for a resource to support parents who have children with disabilities during the school selection and enrollment process. This resource would be useful in assisting families in school selection and transition. Using a collaborative approach to the creation of this document would give families the full universe of resources and organizational supports. Enlisting the support of organizations that focus in this area would be ideal.
2. The District should implement clearer guidelines around oral consent to both parents and LEAs. The new laws that went into effect with the passage of the Special Education Student Rights Act in 2014 are not well understood by students and parents nor schools or educators. Creating digestible guidance to ensure clarity and implementation is necessary.
3. Developing more collaborative partnerships to educate parents and students on their rights is vital. The special education process is extremely nuanced, complex, and challenging to navigate alone. Several partners already exist, but the expansion of these partnerships would ensure that no family or student slips through the cracks and also provides more comprehensive services for our students.

## Public Education Concerns and Resources

Our system of public education in the District is complex. As a city we must ensure that the system is barrier free and easy to navigate for families. To do so, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Continuing to move toward a citywide, "comprehensive data [and resource] warehouse that makes basic information about the school system available in one place" is necessary.<sup>14</sup> Our office plans to continue our efforts with the development and sharing of vital public education resources through our online Education & Community Resource Guide and other online resources. We will continue to reach out to expand partnerships and coalitions to ensure that families have their individual and collective needs met. We believe that our office is uniquely positioned to play this role of convener, collaborator, and connector.
2. Deputy Mayor for Education plays a vital role of coordination in the public education landscape, but a need for an entity like the Interagency Collaboration and Services Integration Commission remains. Coordination of all agencies and organizations that support the needs of children and families is a challenge. Having an entity with the primary focus to coordinate the agencies could decrease the existing silos and duplicative processes that exist.

## Student Safety and Safe Passage

Safe Passage ensures students and parents feel safe as they transition from home to school and from school to life. A positive school climate, as well as partnerships with other schools, organizations, and governmental agencies, will help support a multipronged approach to address issues on all sides. To achieve this, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Evaluation of current school safety and safe passage programs. Develop a list of best practices specific to DC.
2. Support and foster collaborative efforts across government, LEA, and community-based initiatives to ensure comprehensive supports for our students and their families.
3. Develop a list of best practices specific to DC by evaluating current school safety and safe passage programs and functions. This should be inclusive of ongoing engagement opportunities to ensure that parent, student, and community voice are a part of decision-making and policy implementing processes for issues of student safety and safe passage goals.
4. Move toward more community-focused models to support student safety, which include enforcement but are not centered through that lens. ■







## MOVING FORWARD

Our inaugural school year was filled with many firsts and accomplishments for our office. It has been an honor to serve the students and families of the District in a way that allows their voices to be elevated and amplified in our public education system. Our office works to ensure the needs of our students, and their families, are understood, highlighted, and addressed in a focused, yet collaborative way.

We plan to build off our success from this past year by continuing to work collaboratively with our community-based partners, both within the public and charter education sectors, and with our fellow government agencies.

Some of our new initiatives for the upcoming year include:

- ▶ Hosting panels of government officials and organizational leaders to provide guidance to parent leaders on the budget process and how to advocate for resources within their schools;
- ▶ Expanding outreach to non-native English speaking families;
- ▶ Increasing schools' usage of behavior intervention plans as part of a flexible discipline policy;
- ▶ Continuing our special education panel series;
- ▶ Disseminating our Education & Community Resource Guide;
- ▶ Launching our parent advocate training program;
- ▶ Expanding our parent empowerment series to additional wards; and,
- ▶ Partnering with additional community organizations and government to help further our community reach, increase our capacity, and expand our capabilities.

The Office of the Student Advocate was established to support and empower families and communities in navigating the public education system in the District through advocacy and connections that foster and support their students' academic achievement. Supporting students, families, and communities in a way that allows them to have equal access to public education is done not only through resource supports and organizational referrals, but it also through a laser-like focus on systemic issues and barriers that hinder the academic success of our students and stifle family and community voice.

We must continue to boldly face the issues of race and equity. These issues manifest themselves in a variety of ways – such as: poverty, homelessness, food scarcity, language barriers, violence, single-parent households, transportation challenges, special education issues, educational disparities, and more. As the fabric of our city continues to change, we must be honest with ourselves about the role this evolution plays in the persistence of race, equity, and achievement gaps that we continue to see. The progress of our District is for all wards, and all residents. As we continue to move forward, as a city and in public education, we must approach this conversation with empathy and understanding. We must not let language, race, ward of the city, neighborhood, nor family income dictate access to high quality education. Access in our educational community means connections and knowledge. Our office will continue to develop the tools our families need to journey successfully towards educational attainment and prosperity.

Our office looks forward to playing a critical role in amplifying the voices of our students, families, and communities in this conversation. As connectors, conveners, and collaborators, we will ensure that students and families are informed, connected, and empowered to be their own best advocates in public education and in all areas of our city. ■

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Council of the District of Columbia (2007, April 19). DC Act A17-0038: Public Education Reform Amendment Act. Retrieved from: <http://lims.dccouncil.us/Download/8505/B17-0001-ENROLLMENT.pdf>
  - <sup>2</sup> The Council of the District of Columbia (2013, December 16). DC Act 20-242: *The parent and student empowerment act of 2013*. Retrieved from <http://lims.dccouncil.us/Download/29470/B20-0314-SignedAct.pdf>.
  - <sup>3</sup> Public Agenda (2012). *DME community engagement initiative: Combined themes and recommendations from ward 5*. Retrieved from [http://www.publicagenda.org/files/DC\\_Quality\\_Schools\\_Comprehensive%20Summary.pdf](http://www.publicagenda.org/files/DC_Quality_Schools_Comprehensive%20Summary.pdf).
  - <sup>4</sup> Reese, W. J. (1995). *The origins of the American high school*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
  - <sup>5</sup> Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1974). *One best system: A history of American urban education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
  - <sup>6</sup> Education Consortium on Research and Evaluation (EdCORE) at the George Washington University (2014, November 5). *DC public education reform amendment act (PERAA) report no. 5: Community and family education in DC public education: Officials' reports and stakeholders' perceptions*. Retrieved from <http://www.dcauditor.org/sites/default/files/DCA042015.pdf>.
  - <sup>7</sup> Chandler, M. (2014, September 8). District to hire a chief student advocate. Washington Post. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/district-to-hire-a-chief-student-advocate/2014/09/08/b2615f0e-3770-11e4-9c9f-ebb47272e40e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/district-to-hire-a-chief-student-advocate/2014/09/08/b2615f0e-3770-11e4-9c9f-ebb47272e40e_story.html).
  - <sup>8</sup> Church, C. and Rogers, M. (2006). Designing for results: Integrating monitoring and evaluation in conflict transformation programs. *Search for Common Ground*. Retrieved from <https://www.sfcg.org/Documents/manualpart1.pdf>.
  - <sup>9</sup> Warren, M. R., Hong, S., Rubin, C. L., and Uy, P. S. (2009). Beyond the bake sale: A community-based relational approach to parent engagement in schools. *Teachers college record*, 111(9), 2209-2254.
  - <sup>10</sup> More information about our stakeholder engagement can be found on the inside back cover of this report.
  - <sup>11</sup> RFA inquiries concerns range from school-specific issues, such as meeting the needs of a bilingual student or providing the special education services of an Individualized Education Program (IEP), to larger community-wide issues, such as transportation safety or enrollment processes
  - <sup>12</sup> Pappas, L (2012). School closings and parent engagement. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 18.2 (2012): 165-172.
  - <sup>13</sup> Sarason, S. B. (1990). *The predictable failure of educational reform: Can we change course before it's too late?* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
  - <sup>14</sup> Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
  - <sup>15</sup> Farkas, S., & Duffett, A. (2015). Maze of mistrust: Parents, educators, and the challenge of public engagement. *National Civic Review*, 104(1), 33-46.
  - <sup>16</sup> National Research Council of the National Academies (2015). *An Evaluation of Public Schools of the District of Columbia: Reform in a Changing Landscape*. Retrieved from <http://www.dcauditor.org/sites/default/files/An%20Evaluation%20of%20the%20Public%20Schools%20of%20the%20District%20of%20Columbia.pdf>.
  - <sup>17</sup> Doherty, W. J., Jacob, J., & Cutting, B. (2009). Community engaged parent education: Strengthening civic engagement among parents and parent educators. *Family Relations*, 58(3), 303-315.
  - <sup>18</sup> The work of the Flamboyant Foundation, within DCPS and public charter schools, is evidence of quality constructive dialogue at the school level. With a framework focused on improving family engagement more broadly and have seen improvements through "interventions to build teachers' capacity to engage families can lead to better [academic] outcomes for students and teachers," establish trusting relationships, and increase engagement/participation of families.
  - <sup>19</sup> Brooks-Nelson, E., Portwood, S. G., and Schoeneberger, J. (2014, July 9). Data and evaluation strategies to support parent engagement programs: Learnings from an evaluation of parent university. *Children & Schools: A Journal of the National Association of Social Workers*, 37(3), 145-153.
  - <sup>20</sup> Auerbach, S. (2009). Walking the walk: Portraits in leadership for family engagement in urban schools. *School Community Journal*, 19, 9—31.
  - <sup>21</sup> Noguera, P. (2001). Transforming urban schools through investments in the social capital of parents. In M. Warren (Ed.), *Social capital in poor communities* (pp. 189—212). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
  - <sup>22</sup> Deliberative democracy believes that citizens, who will be affected by the policies should have an actual role, and influence, in the decision making process.
- Reference for citation:  
Nabatchi, T. (2010). The (re)discovery of the public in public administration. *Public Administration Review*, 70(S1): s309-s311.  
Ryfe, D. M. (2005). Does liberative democracy work? *Annual Review of Political Science*, 8(1): 49-71.



<sup>23</sup> Inclusion practices entail “continuously creating a community involved in coproducing processes, policies, and programs for defining and addressing public issues.”

Reference for citation:

Feldman, M. S. and Quick, K. S. Distinguishing participation and inclusion. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*: 31(3).

<sup>24</sup> Coproduction is participation that builds community. Joshi & Moore (2004) discuss coproduction in terms of the fostering of relationships and development of trust, which “the development of mutual relationships in which both parties take risks — the community has to be able to trust advice and support of administrators, but the administrators must also be prepared to trust the decisions and behaviors of the community rather than attempting to dictate them.”

Reference for citation:

Joshi, A. and Moore, M. (2004). *Institutionalized co-production: Unorthodox public service delivery in challenging environments*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ids.ac.uk/futurestate/pdfs/jds40-4.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> i.e. safe passage, truancy, cross-sector collaboration, student discipline, ESSA and other school accountability frameworks

<sup>26</sup> i.e. the student assignment and school boundary review process for DCPS

<sup>27</sup> Council for Court Excellence (2015). *Equity in school discipline report: An examination of school disciplinary policies and practices in the District of Columbia public education system and recommendations for reform*. Retrieved from [http://www.courtexcellence.org/uploads/publications/Equity\\_in\\_School\\_Discipline\\_Report\\_\\_\\_FINAL\\_31115.pdf](http://www.courtexcellence.org/uploads/publications/Equity_in_School_Discipline_Report___FINAL_31115.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) Equity Reports. Retrieved from: <http://osse.dc.gov/equity-reports>

<sup>29</sup> LearnDC School Profiles and State Report Card. Office of the State Superintendent of Education. Retrieved from: <http://www.learndc.org/schoolprofiles/view>

<sup>30</sup> District of Columbia Office of the Superintendent of Education (2016, June 29). *Non-regulatory LEA discipline guidance*. Retrieved from <http://osse.dc.gov/publication/osse-releases-non-regulatory-lea-discipline-guidance>.

<sup>31</sup> District of Columbia Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education (2015). *2015 Annual Report*. Retrieved from [http://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/publication/attachments/DCO\\_2015%20Annual%20Report\\_final\\_large5.pdf](http://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/publication/attachments/DCO_2015%20Annual%20Report_final_large5.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> District of Columbia Public Schools (2009, August 14). *Notice of final rulemaking*. <http://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/publication/attachments/DCMR-Chapter-25-Title-5-Final-Rulemaking-2009.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> 108th Congress (2004). Public law 108-446: Individuals with disabilities education act. Retrieved from <http://idea.ed.gov/part-c/downloads/IDEA-Statute.html>.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (2015, November 30). Individuals with disabilities education act (IDEA): Section 618 data products: State level data files. Digest of Education Statistics 2015. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/state-level-data-files/index.html>.

<sup>35</sup> LearnDC (2015). *DC Report Card*. Retrieved from <http://www.learndc.org/schoolprofiles/view?s=dc#profile>.

<sup>36</sup> Kids Count Data Center (2016). *Students with an IEP*. Retrieved from <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/6563-students-with-an-iep?loc=10&loct=3#detailed/3/any/false/1536,1460,1249,1120,1024/898,894,897,1857/13549>.

<sup>37</sup> The Council of the District of Columbia (2014, November 20). *D.C. Act 20-486: Special education student rights act of 2014*. Retrieved from <http://lms.dccouncil.us/Download/31379/B20-0723-SignedAct.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Bill 21-669 drafted by the Council of the District of Columbia tasks the Deputy Mayor of Education (DME) to report on safe passage systems by October 1, 2016. The DME must submit “a proposed plan for schools where students are suffering from safe passage issues of bullying, violence, or other impediments to getting to and from school and recommendations for best practices for improved safe passage policies that schools can adopt.”

Reference for citation:

The Council of the District of Columbia (2016, May 16). *Bill 21-669: FY17 budget support act of 2016*. Retrieved from [http://dccouncil.us/files/user\\_uploads/budget/B21669FY17BudgetSupportActof2016draftprintclean.pdf](http://dccouncil.us/files/user_uploads/budget/B21669FY17BudgetSupportActof2016draftprintclean.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> Safe Routes to School National Partnership. *The 6 Es*. Retrieved from <http://saferoutespartnership.org/healthy-communities/101/6Es>.

<sup>40</sup> District of Columbia Office of the Superintendent of Education. *Reducing out-of-school suspensions and expulsions in District of Columbia public and charter schools*. Retrieved from [http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/OSSE\\_REPORT\\_DISCIPLINARY\\_G\\_PAGES.pdf](http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/OSSE_REPORT_DISCIPLINARY_G_PAGES.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Department of Education, District of Columbia State Profile, school year 2011-12 data. Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/fund/data/report/idea/partbspap/2013/dc-acc-stateprofile-11-12.pdf>

# STAKEHOLDER & COMMUNITY OUTREACH



Office of the State Superintendent of Education  
Senior High Alliance of Parents Principals and Educators (S.H.A.P.P.E)  
Capitol Hill Public School Parent Organization  
Coalition for DC Public Schools & Communities (C4DC)  
Carlos Rosario Education Fair  
Raise DC  
DC School Reform Now  
Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law  
The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law  
District of Columbia Association for Special Education’s Advocacy Forum  
DC Fiscal Policy Institute  
Flamboyant Foundation  
DC Action for Children  
Re-Engagement Center, Office of the State Superintendent of Education  
Fellowship for Race & Equity in Education  
Office of Specialized Instruction, DC Public Schools  
EDFest  
OCASE Foundation Backpack School Supply Giveaway  
DC Alliance for Youth Advocates  
Far Southeast Family Collaborative  
21st Century School Fund  
DC’s Secondary Transition Forum: Voice of Change  
Mayor’s Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs  
Mayor’s Office on African Affairs  
Ward 2 Education Network  
Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs  
Advisory Neighborhood Commission 7B  
We Act Radio’s The Education Town Hall  
Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative

